

## Message Text

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ACTION HA-05

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C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 1755

E.O. 11652: GDS  
TAGS: SHUM, TS, PINT  
SUBJECT: MEETING WITH PRESIDENT OF TUNISIAN LEAGUE FOR  
RIGHTS OF MAN

1. EMBOFF CALLED ON DR. SAADEDDINE ZMERLI, PRESIDENT OF TUNISIAN LEAGUE FOR THE RIGHTS OF MAN AT HIS OFFICE AT CHARLES NICOLE HOSPITAL THE MORNING OF MARCH 9. ZMERLI HAD AGREED TO MEET EMBOFF FOR REVIEW OF RECENT ACTIVITIES OF LEAGUE. ZMERLI EXPRESSED PESSIMISM OF CURRENT HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN TUNISIA. HE SAID LEAGUE AND ALL TUNISIANS REGRETTED DEATHS WHICH OCCURRED ON JANUARY 26 BUT ONE MUST BE CIRCUMSPECT AS THEY OCCURRED WHILE ORDER WAS BEING RESTORED. THE DEAD ARE DEAD AND THERE IS NOTHING WE CAN DO TO BRING THEM BACK, HE SAID. DEEPER AND MORE SERIOUS HUMAN RIGHTS PROBLEM IS AN INSTITUTIONAL ONE: THE GOVERNMENT'S DISREGARD FOR RIGHTS OF THE INDIVIDUAL. MOST RECENT EXAMPLE IS GOVERNMENT'S HOLDING OVER 100 DETAINEES IN POLICE CUSTODY FOR PAST SIX WEEKS; MOST OF THESE ARE MEMBERS OF UGTT ARRESTED AFTER JAN 26, NOT DURING STRIKE ITSELF. TO DATE GOVERNMENT HAS NOT BROUGHT CHARGES AGAINST THESE PEOPLE NOR HAS IT ALLOWED THEIR ATTORNEYS ACCESS. CONDITIONS OF DETENTION ARE VERY POOR BESIDES.

2. ON FEBRUARY 16 DELEGATION OF LEAGUE SOUGHT TO SEE PRIME MINISTER TO REGISTER CONCERN OVER DETENTION ISSUE. NOUIRA WAS "UNAVAILABLE" AND REQUEST FOR LATER APPOINTMENT  
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WAS REFUSED. GROUP WAS RECEIVED BY PRIME MINISTER'S CHEF DE CABINET WHO EXPLAINED THAT ACCUSATIONS AGAINST DETAINEES WERE SERIOUS. MATTER WAS BEYOND COMPETENCE OF PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE NOW AND LEAGUE SHOULD ADDRESS INQUIREIS TO JUDICIAL OFFICIALS AND POLICE. APPOINTMENTS WERE SOUGHT WITH RESPONSIBLE OFFICIALS IN BOTH AREAS WITHOUT SUCCESS. INTERIOR MINISTER'S OFFICE SUGGESTED LEAGUE

SEND WRITTEN REQUEST FOR APPOINTMENT WITH MINISTER WHICH LEAGUE DID. DESPITE REPEATED FOLLOW UPS, MINISTER HANNABLIA HAS YET TO AGREE TO SEE LEAGUE REPRESENTATIVES.

3. SMERLI DESCRIBED GOVERNMENT'S POSITION AS "WALL OF SILENCE WHICH IS INCREASINGLY IMPENETRABLE." HE REGRETTED THIS ATTITUDE AS IT COULD ONLY MAKE MATTERS WORSE. LEAGUE, WHICH INCLUDES ELEMENTS OF ALL POLITICAL THOUGHT IN IN TUNISIA, HAD STUDIOUSLY AVOIDED TAKING POLITICAL POSITIONS CONCERNING RECENT TROUBLE. THEY COULD NOT, HOWEVER, IGNORE THE DETERIORATING HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION.

4. LEAGUE IS BEGINNING TO RECEIVE PETITIONS FROM FAMILIES AND FRIENDS OF DETAINEES REQUESTING INTERVENTION. IT HAS ALSO JUST RECEIVED (TODAY) PETITION SIGNED BY 293 TUNISIANS PROTESTING THE DEATH OF HUSSEIN KOUKI MID-FEBRUARY WHILE UNDER POLICE DETENTION. LEAGUE IS OBLIGED TO TAKE THIS MATTER SERIOUSLY AND WILL GO TO GOVERNMENT ABOUT MATTER AFTER CHARGES ARE INVESTIGATED. ZMERLI SHOWED EMBOFF FILE CONTAINING SIGNED PETITIONS. ZMERLI SAID LEAGUE WOULD NOT DIVULGE NAMES OF 293 BECAUSE OF THE FEAR OF GOVERNMENT RETALIATION. LEAGUE DOES NOT BELIEVE KOUKI'S DEATH WAS PLANNED, BUT FACTS ARE FACTS: KOUKI WAS ONLY 40 YEARS OLD AND IN GOOD HEALTH WHEN TAKEN INTO CUSTODY. AS SOON AS STORY CAME TO LIGHT A COUPLE OF WEEKS AGO, THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD HAVE OPENED PUBLIC INQUEST TO OBTAIN FACTS AND FIX CONFIDENTIAL

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RESPONSIBILITY. THIS WOULD HAVE SATISFIED THE LEAGUE, BUT UNFORTUNATELY THE GOVERNMENT IS TRYING TO COVER UP AND THIS CAN ONLY MAKE MATTERS WORSE.

5. AT MOMENT LEAGUE DOES NOT PLAN TO HOLD ANY PUBLIC MEETING OR DEMONSTRATIONS BUT PREFERS TO TRY TO WORK QUIETLY BEHIND SCENES TO FORCE GOVERNMENT TO TAKE RESPONSIBLE POSITION. ZMERLI WAS NOT OPTIMISTIC THIS COULD BE ACHIEVED. ZMERLI ADDED HE WAS SURE PRIME MINISTER WAS NOT A HARDLINER BUT HE FELT HE WAS NOW IN THE HANDS OF PEOPLE WHO WERE. ZMERLI GAVE EMBOFF COPY OF LEAGUE REPORT DATED MARCH 6 TO INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN PARIS. RESUME THIS REPORT BEING SUBMITTED SEPTTEL.

6. ZMERLI ASKED EMBOFF WHAT EMBASSY COULD DO TO AID LEAGUE AND ITS EFFORTS. EMBOFF REPLIED THAT WHILE EMBASSY WOULD NOT SEEK INTERVENTION IN TUNISIAN DOMESTIC POLITICS, WE RETAIN GREAT INTEREST IN HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN TUNISIA. THIS IS WELL KNOWN AND WE HAVE MADE THIS POSITION CLEAR TO NUMEROUS GOT OFFICIALS IN VARIOUS WAYS. WE WILL CONTINUE TO FOLLOW DEVELOPMENTS AND MAINTAIN CONTACT WITH LEAGUE. ZMERLI EXPRESSED GRATIFICATION AT THIS INTEREST.

MULCAHY

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## Message Attributes

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